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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 000053

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/W  
STATE FOR INR/AA

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: TRADITIONAL RULER SHARES OPINIONS ON 3RD TERM,  
PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESSION

REF: 05 LAGOS 1865

Classified By: Acting Consul General William Howe for Reason 1.4 (D)

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) In a recent meeting with the Consul General and PAO, the Ooni of Ife, traditional ruler of the Yorubas and influential power broker, said that President Obasanjo was planning on leaving office after 2007 rather than undertake the arduous task of amending the constitution. The Ooni ruled out popularly-perceived front runners Ibrahim Babangida, Peter Odili, and Orji Kalu, but indirectly identified Buba Marwa as the current favorite. According to the Ooni, Marwa's military experience and tenure as governor in two states make him a desirable candidate, and with Peter Odili of the oil-rich Rivers State as vice presidential candidate, a Marwa ticket checks all the necessary boxes. End summary.

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PRESIDENT READY TO LEAVE, BUT WHO WILL FOLLOW?  
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2. (C) In a candid January 11 meeting with the Consul General and PAO, the Ooni of Ife, traditional ruler of the Yorubas and longtime friend and confidante of President Obasanjo, painted a very different political picture from the one he described in our last audience with him in November (reftel). The Ooni downplayed the recent talk about a third term for the President, saying instead the President is ready to leave office. Despite pressure from business leaders for him to stay on, the President respects the two-term constitutional limit. (NOTE: Some (unnamed) business leaders are, according to the Ooni, very supportive of Obasanjo's reform agenda and thus receptive to the idea of a third term. End note.)

3. (C) The key point, continued the Ooni, is finding a suitable successor. The next President should be younger, of the new generation of politicians, and have a proven track record of good governance and discipline, which the Ooni insisted meant someone with a military background. Nigerians lack discipline, said the Ooni, and military experience instills that quality. President Obasanjo's shoes will be hard to fill, for "...he is a bloody worker!" stressed the Ooni, citing the President's noted work ethic stemming from his farming and military background. The Ooni also said that a national meeting of traditional rulers will be held soon to discuss the way forward.

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PRESIDENTIAL THUMBS DOWN TO BABANGIDA, DUKE, ODILI AND KALU  
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4. (C) When the Consul General asked who the leading successor candidate might be, the Ooni commented on a number of the popularly-perceived contenders. Former military ruler Ibrahim Babangida is a non-starter. While he is a close friend of President Obasanjo, the President does not believe he is a suitable candidate to succeed him and maintain the reforms started during this administration.

5. (C) Governor Donald Duke of Cross River State has done a good job, continued the Ooni, but he is not from a major oil producing state. Rivers State Governor Peter Odili, who is close to the President, is a possibility from an oil-rich state, but "...the Igbos are not ready," said the Ooni. "Give them one chance and they will take ten." The Ooni also discounted Abia State governor Orji Kalu's suitability. "That man..." chuckled the Ooni, shaking his head.

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MARWA / ODILI TICKET CHECKS ALL THE BOXES  
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6. (C) The Ooni went on to describe the leading candidate. This man has the desired military background along with

demonstrated ability to govern. The Ooni said this candidate is a northerner who, during the Abacha years, visited President Carter and later delivered a letter to Sani Abacha interceding on then-General Obasanjo's behalf. (Comment: The candidate the Ooni described, without identifying him by name, is retired General Buba Marwa. End comment.)

17. (C) Following the Ooni's lead, PAO asked about the prospects for retired General Buba Marwa. The Ooni cagily continued that Marwa had a good record as governor of Borno and Lagos States and had the desired military background. He is also popular in the north and his election would fulfill the purported deal made at Obasanjo's re-election in 2003 to shift power back to a northerner in 2007, the Ooni continued. This would quiet the clamor in the northeast, and because Marwa is not perceived as beholden to the Sokoto / Kano group, his candidacy has less risk of alienating the southern elite. However, he is not from an oil-producing state, so his Vice President would have to fill that gap, said the Ooni. Governor Odili, with his experience governing an oil-producing state, southern roots to offset Marwa's northern background, and close relationship to President Obasanjo, would be a strong vice presidential complement to Marwa. (Comment: Interestingly, Odili is also Igbo, but apparently suitable for a vice presidential role. End comment.)

17. (C) The Ooni granted that Marwa's recent detention and ongoing investigation by the EFCC appeared troublesome, but said because the investigation was not directed by President Obasanjo but was instead probably engineered by some of Marwa's rivals, he expected Marwa to emerge relatively unscathed and still a viable candidate.

18. (C) Consul General then asked how this proposed 2007 ticket would fly given the clamor from two recent summits of southern leaders held in Lagos and Enugu calling for rotating the Presidency among the six geo-political zones, beginning with southeast or south south in 2007. The Ooni downplayed the difficulty of obtaining support from southern leaders. "Most of them are my subjects," said the Ooni, so they would follow his direction. The Ooni also said he has a personal stake in fulfilling the 2003 deal to return the Presidency to the north, as he was directly involved in brokering the arrangement.

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) The Ooni has close ties to the President and other traditional and political elites, and as we found in our November audience with him, he knows the current political landscape. The Ooni's statement that the President is leaning against a third term tracks with the messages we have received from other informed sources. Additionally, the Marwa / Odili combination is indeed a strong one, for the reasons the Ooni listed. The outcome of the upcoming meeting of traditional rulers, who are very influential with their own subjects as well as politically, will be telling. However, just as the current landscape painted by the Ooni is different from that he described just two months ago, the picture of two months from now will most probably differ from today's. Although the Ooni is very influential, most of the southern leaders are in fact not his subjects, and gaining their acceptance to his direction will be more difficult than he describes. End comment.

HOWE